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FRANK R. STOCKTON.

APRIL, 1902, chronicled for us the death of Frank R. Stockton, one of the most genial and brilliant of American authors. Stockton is favorably known and read throughout the country. Nor is his fame confined to our American shores. His clever short stories and juvenile books have contributed to make his name in England almost as familiar as a household word, and his works are well-nigh as popular in English homes as in his native land. Death seems to have removed him from us all too soon. His pen gave no sign of waning productivity or decreasing skill. When the end came, he was still a vigorous and active writer of only three score years, and was planning even greater things than he had yet accomplished.

Stockton was born in Philadelphia April 5, 1834. His father was a prominent Methodist preacher and author, who used much ink and paper in his trenchant, vigorous theological controversies, and was an uncompromising champion of a number of reforms in his Church. Of these reforms, perhaps the most noteworthy was that of lay representation. Young Stockton was educated in the public schools of Philadelphia; and upon his graduation from the Central High School, in 1850, he entered an engraver's office, intending to make that trade his life work. Applying himself with commendable zeal to his profession, he invented and patented, in 1860, a double engraver. His profession, however, cannot have been to his taste, for shortly afterwards he abandoned it and entered journalism.

Stockton showed very early a bent to literature. While he was occupied as a draughtsman and engraver in his native city, he connected himself with a local literary and debating society, and soon came to be recognized as its leading spirit. This society proved very stimulating and helpful to the young author, and perhaps gave him his taste for a literary calling.

However that may be, it was during those days, while he was in the engraver's business, that he began to employ his pen and that he wrote some of his juvenile stories, which he kept for years in manuscript in his desk.

In 1867 Stockton abandoned the occupation of an engraver and entered journalism. He first became a reporter on the staff of the Philadelphia *Morning Post*, but soon a more attractive offer came to him from New York, and he thereupon resigned his position with the *Post* to go to New York. Here he became associate editor of *Hearth and Home*, and found a larger field for his pen, which he now kept busy producing "copy," signed and unsigned. Here also he became a constant contributor to *Punchinello* and *Vanity Fair*, the pages of which were enlivened by the products of his wit and humor. From *Hearth and Home* he was called to the editorial staff of *Scribner's Magazine*; and upon the establishment of *St. Nicholas* he was appointed assistant editor of that juvenile monthly.

Perhaps Stockton is best known by his tales for children. The distinction which he enjoys in this field is certainly well earned. He is one of the most entertaining of those American authors who have written children's stories. Some of the most popular of these may be mentioned: his "Ting-a-Ling" series, "Roundabout Rambles," "What Might Have Been Expected," "Tales out of School," "A Jolly Fellowship," and "The Floating Prince." Stockton had a warm place in his heart for the young, and himself never lost interest in youthful aspirations, hopes, and amusements. It was a young heart that beat in his bosom, and that heart never grew old, despite his advancing years. It is said that shortly before he died he was planning "a rollicking boys' book, which should make all the boys and all the girls glad." He was a devoted lover of boys and girls; and these books of his are designed to offer them good, wholesome amusement, such as will make their lives purer and better for the reading.

Stockton, however, was not simply a writer for the young. He wrote stories also for men and women—children of a larger growth. Here are to be classed "The Lady, or the

Tiger?" "The Spectral Mortgage," "A Tale of Negative Gravity," "The Discourager of Hesitancy," "The Christmas Wreck," and "Rudder Grange." His novels include "The Late Mrs. Null," "The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine," which appeared in 1886, together with the sequel, "The Dusantes," and "The Hundredth Man."

Of all of our author's short stories, "The Lady, or the Tiger?" is the best known. This famous story did more than any other of the author's many clever productions to enhance his reputation as a story-writer. It was soon dramatized, and enjoys the rare distinction of being considered by many eminent critics the finest short story in American literature. By its excellence and popularity it came near ruining its author's market for his literary products, for it set a standard among the magazines which Stockton, however earnestly and industriously he labored, found it well-nigh impossible to live up to. His experience with magazine editors after the publication of "The Lady, or the Tiger?" he has set forth for us in the highly interesting story, "His Wife's Deceased Sister."

Speaking of this experience in a letter to his friend George Cary Eggleston, he says: "After I had written that story, all the editors of all the periodicals wrote asking me to furnish them with short stories. Of course I had a quiver full, and, as these people seemed anxious for them, I thought that my harvest time had come. So I proceeded to write with all my might. But presently the stories began coming back to me with editorial regrets that they did not seem to be equal to 'The Lady, or the Tiger?' In other words, I found that I had ruined my own market by furnishing one story which I could not quite live up to. I succeeded after a while in selling the rejected stories here, there, and everywhere, but the experience was annoying. Among the rejected stories were 'Plain Fishing,' 'The Reversible Landscape,' and others. I wrote 'His Wife's Deceased Sister' in the bitterness of my soul at that period, as a protest against the assumption that when a man does his very best he places

himself under obligation to do as well on every succeeding occasion or starve to death for lack of ability to do so."

Stockton's stories are all marked by quaintness of treatment and subject and by a dry humor. Of his longer stories, probably "Rudder Grange" is the finest. But this book owes its success not so much to its plot as to its genial simplicity and pleasing style. It is not a great story in any sense of the word; it is not a novel; it has no plot, and therefore no climax or *dénouement*. It is merely a succession of entertaining incidents, setting forth the experiences of a young man and his wife, possessed of modest means, who are just starting out in life. Yet there is some attempt at characterization, and the book is replete with incident from cover to cover and is well designed to hold the reader's attention. Like all of Stockton's works, "Rudder Grange" is clean and wholesome and contains nothing morbid or immoral. As a rule, Stockton is weakest in his plots and characterization. In this respect he reminds us of Hawthorne, who, although he wrote four long novels, never created a single individualized character. None of Stockton's characters will endure and become permanent possessions of American literature. They are not clearly enough conceived and executed to be abiding and immortal. Stockton attempted a few things in the grotesque after the manner of Poe; as, for instance, his "Spectral Mortgage" and "Transferred Ghost." But he was no competitor of Poe in this field, for he lacked Poe's robust and abnormal imagination. But this is no disparagement, as no other American has ever equaled Poe in imagination.

One of the most striking features of Stockton's books is their high moral tone. All his works breathe an especially pure and wholesome spirit. He wrote nothing of a questionable character. Whether writing for men and women or for children, he was actuated always by the noblest and loftiest impulses. He wrote nothing which he or any one else could have wished blotted out because of its dubious morality. The truth is, Stockton had a high conception of his art, and he felt that he could not afford to compromise it

in any manner. Never for once, therefore, did he prostitute his profession of letters by catering to the degrading taste, alas! too common, for salacious literature. His books may be read with perfect safety by boys and girls alike, for he was among the purest and wholesomest of our American authors.

As is well known, Stockton had a keen wit. Were it necessary, numerous instances might be cited of this felicitous gift of style. It is generally held that Stockton was also a humorist. In one sense this view is correct, but only in a limited sense. In the currently accepted meaning of the term, the statement is not quite true. He was a humorist, but not a satirist, for Stockton was not a humorist in the sense of being frivolous or mocking at the serious things in life. Many humorists regard nothing as sacred and as being outside the legitimate bounds of jest; even the most serious realities of life are drawn upon for material for their jests. But Stockton was not of this class. To him some things were too sacred to jest about. As a critic has written of him, he never took a flippant view of any sacred thing, and he never made sport of any human emotion that had a heart behind it.

Such was Stockton as we see him now with our relative vision. A gentle wit, a rare humorist, a pure and wholesome author, Frank R. Stockton, as he is familiarly known, has greatly enriched American literature by the contribution of his entertaining and elevating books which his prolific and facile pen had bequeathed his generation before he fell on sleep and was gathered unto his fathers.

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